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TAGS: PINR EAGR ECON SY
SUBJECT: SYRIA AND UG99 DAMAGING WHEAT FUNGUS (C-TN8-00647)

REF: A. STATE 38800 B. DAMASCUS 311

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) In response to ref A, ICARDA has not confirmed any reports of Ug99 stem rust in Syria. Should a possible outbreak occur, ICARDA's staff pathologist is capable of conducting in-house laboratory analysis to quickly determine whether the disease is Ug99. Although SARG Agriculture Ministry contingency plans for Ug99 are unknown, ICARDA experts believe application of fungicides could control an outbreak if it is identified early enough. ICARDA's main contribution to combatting Ug99 comes from identifying lines and varieties of wheat that are genetically resistant to the disease, and making these strains available to national programs throughout north Africa, the Near East and Southwest Asia. Although Ug99 is not yet present in Syria, persistent drought conditions, late frosts, and a recent increase in the price of diesel are contributing to a difficult year for Syrian wheat and barley farmers. Consequently, the latest estimate of the 2008 wheat crop projects a yield of only two million tons -- a decline of 60 percent below average. End summary.

No Reports of Stem Rust in Syria

¶2. (SBU) According to the Aleppo-based International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), there have been no reports of Ug99 stem rust yet in Syria. While there have been isolated reports of leaf rust and yellow (stripe) rust, the continuing three-year drought in Syria has not been conducive to the development of wheat rust and other foliar diseases.

Unusual Problems for Wheat and Barley Farmers

¶3. (SBU) Even without the presence of Ug99, Syrian wheat and barley farmers are having a difficult year (ref B). Current cumulative rainfall to date is just 211mm, down from an average cumulative rainfall of 319mm since 1978. A warm winter, coupled with a late spring frost, has exacerbated the drought conditions and decreased this year's wheat and barley crop. Furthermore, the SARG's May 3 decision to increase the price of subsidized diesel (mazout) by 357 percent convinced many farmers to cease irrigation. Facing higher costs for irrigation, harvesting, and transportation to market (only to sell at below-market government-fixed prices), many farmers are trying to recoup production costs by selling their irrigated crops for grazing sheep. Normally, Syria produces

4.7 to 4.9 million tons per year (mt/yr) of wheat, while domestic demand averages four mt/yr. A recent albeit informal USDA estimate of the 2008 crop projects a yield of only two million tons -- a decline of 60 percent.

Monitoring Programs and Laboratory Tests for Ug99

¶4. (SBU) ICARDA contributes to monitoring and surveillance of Ug99 through the Borlaug Global Rust Initiative (BGRI), which was launched in April 2008. ICARDA's staff pathologist is capable of conducting laboratory examinations of wheat rust samples at the ICARDA campus to quickly determine whether or not the disease is Ug99.

Ministry of Agriculture's Plan for Containing Outbreak

¶5. (SBU) Due to the strained bilateral relationship, Post has no direct communication with the Syrian Ministry of Agriculture. While ICARDA enjoys better relations with the Ministry of Agriculture, ICARDA staff are reluctant to jeopardize this relationship by sharing information about any SARG plans with Post. Even so, ICARDA experts emphasized that the extent to which they could control an outbreak by the rapid application (spraying) of fungicides would depend on identifying the disease in the early stages of infection.

ICARDA's Efforts to Combat Ug99

¶6. (SBU) ICARDA has been working closely with FAO, USDA, and other national and international organizations to combat the spread of Ug99 since the Global Rust Initiative (GRI) was launched in 2005. ICARDA experts believe the most effective strategy for controlling the disease is by growing wheat varieties that are genetically resistant. Consequently, ICARDA's primary contributions are to identify lines and varieties of wheat that are genetically resistant to Ug99, and make these strains available to national programs throughout north Africa, the Near East and Southwest Asia.
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